

## **KFL&A Social Services Recovery Task Force Update October 2020**

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### **Background**

The charitable sector, that serves some of the most vulnerable individuals in our community, is often fragile. The sector relies on staff (often underpaid with minimal benefits) and volunteers, donors and funders to provide the resources with which to do important work - providing essential services to people in the community.

On March 17, 2020, the provincial government in Ontario ordered a shutdown due to Covid-19. Some essential services and businesses continued, including agencies delivering programs to serve the vulnerable. Charities have been immersed in responding to the immediate needs of their clients while adjusting to the requirements for social distancing during the current pandemic. Domestic violence and calls for sexual assault counselling are up significantly, food and meal programs have more than tripled, and the need for mental health support and counselling is up.

Funding has always been unstable for many charities, and the current pandemic has impacted fundraising efforts and events. There is uncertainty and concern that many donors may need to curtail their charitable giving if they are struggling themselves. This crisis has resulted in agencies struggling to cope with increased demand, staffing shortages, and more expensive program delivery.

Charities rose to the challenge in innovative, collaborative, and caring ways. Six months into the pandemic, the taskforce is working on plans for the recovery phase and beyond.

### **Social Services Recovery Task Force (SSRTF)**

The Social Services Recovery Task Force was started by United Way in May 2020 to explore opportunities for stabilization, collaboration and coordination among agencies in the social services sector in KFL&A. This includes programs for food, homelessness, mental health, counselling and safety from violence in the region.

Parallel to this, the Kingston Economic Recovery Task Force was created by Mayor Bryan Paterson to look at economic recovery. To ensure linkage between the two, Mayor Bryan Paterson (City of Kingston), Bhavana Varma (United Way), and Ian Murdoch (Kingston Economic Development) sit on both task forces.

United Way KFL&A: United Way provides facilitation, leadership, administrative and logistical support to SSRTF.

## **Membership:**

Amber Bryant-Peller	City of Kingston, Special Assistant to the Mayor
Anthony Goerzen	Queen's University, Smith School of Business
Bhavana Varma	United Way KFL&A, President & CEO (Chair)
Dan Irwin	Partners In Mission Food Bank, Executive Director
Daphne Mayer	KFL&A Public Health, Manager, Substance Use, Mental Health, and Injury Prevention
David Townsend	Southern Frontenac Community Services, Executive Director
Don Amos	Seniors Association Kingston Region, Executive Director
Harold Parsons	Boys & Girls Club of Kingston & Area, Executive Director
Ian Murdoch	Kingston Economic Development Corporation
Karen Smith	Limestone District School Board, Communications Officer
Kim Irvine-Albano	Resolve Counselling Services, Director of Clinical Programming
Jennifer Ruddy	Loving Spoonful, Executive Director
Lindsey Belch	Girls Inc. Limestone, Algonquin, Lakeshore, Executive Director
Louise Moody	Rural Frontenac Community Services, Executive Director
Rob Adams	YMCA Eastern Ontario, CEO
Ruth Noordegraaf	City of Kingston, Director of Housing and Social Services
Shawn Quigley	Youth Diversion, Executive Director
Tina Bailey	Community Foundation for Kingston & Area, Executive Director
Wendy Vuyk	KCHC, Director of Community Health
Ex-Officio:	Mayor Bryan Paterson

## **United Way: support and coordination**

Kim Hockey	Senior Director Community Impact
Marg Kubalak	Director Community Investment
Kaitlin Gibson	Program Associate

## **Objectives of SSRTF:**

There have always been gaps in the system. The pandemic has served to enhance these gaps, which have opened up to create crevasses; and the most vulnerable are most impacted. As a sector, agencies are working closely together to ensure no one is left behind, addressing issues with compassion, caring and support.

**Collaboration and Coordination:** explore how community agencies may be able to work together to achieve efficiencies and enhancements in program delivery, exploring ways to look at system-wide collaboration and coordination

**Needs:** identify the critical needs in the social services sector – short, intermediate and long term - and look at ways to address potential gaps with potentially limited resources.

**Stabilization:** understand the impact the pandemic will have on the social services sector in the region, and what sources of funding can be invested in priority areas to replace funding shortfalls.

## **Process**

Members of the SSRTF agreed to be a part of the planning process which would take approximately six months. At the end of these six months, the task force will identify key focus areas, action and implementation plans and development of these plans would continue. At the time, it was estimated that the pandemic would last approximately 18 months; however, new estimates suggest the pandemic could impact services through 2022 and possibly beyond.

There were two facilitated sessions in May and Jun, led by Erik Lockhart, Executive Decision Centre, Smith School of Business. As a result, 3 areas of focus were identified:

- Coordination & Collaboration
- Redesign of services
- Marketing & Advocacy

Working groups were recruited in each of these areas. Tina Bailey (Community Foundation of Kingston & Area), Kim Irvine-Albano (Resolve Counselling Centre), Shawn Quigley (Youth Diversion) and Karen Smith (Limestone District School Board) volunteered to lead the discussion in these three working groups, with logistical support provided by Kaitlin Gibson (United Way).

A summary of this work is included in this update.

## **MARCH THROUGH SEPTEMBER**

### **Covid-19 funding:**

Funders are working together to disburse funds available to assist agencies to cope with the immediate increase in demand.

- The City of Kingston is leveraging provincial Social Services Relief Funding. (approx. \$1.4M in Phase 1, \$2.2M in Phase 2) to support housing and homelessness
- United Way has received and disbursed special Reaching Home Funds (approx. \$600k) for housing and homelessness
- United Way KFLA Covid-19 Fund (approx. \$300k) for response to the pandemic
- Community Foundation & United Way have disbursed the first round and are currently in the process of disbursing the second round of federal Emergency Community Support funds (approx. \$1.6M)

They continue to advocate for funding for long-term solutions to allow the most vulnerable.

## **SOCIAL SERVICE RESPONSE TO PANDEMIC**

### **Food Security**

The primary issue that emerged, across the country and locally, is food access. The number of people accessing food banks, meal programs, food boxes has increased exponentially and continues to increase. Locally, numbers have tripled for food programs – over \$1700 meals a day, seven days a week. The number of hampers and food boxes have increased as well – access to food and affordability are key issues; over 3,500 frozen meals, hampers are distributed to families with children (who may

otherwise have received food at school), seniors on low-income, post-secondary students as well as individuals. Many of these families and individuals did not anticipate ever having to access services.

Additionally meal programs and food banks needed to adjust to volunteers not being able to support these programs, due to space restrictions or safety requirements. All meal programs needed to adjust to provide take-out rather than table service, which increased the logistics and cost for take-out containers, personal protective equipment. With winter approaching, many food and meal programs worry about how they will be able to serve their guests safely outdoors. All meal and food providers, funders, Public Health meet once a week to problem-solve, share resources and find ways to support each other.

### **Housing and homelessness**

While there have always been individuals on the streets in Kingston, the pandemic highlighted the issues of access to affordable housing, programs to serve the hardest-to-serve. Shelters were temporarily relocated to spaces that allowed people to self-isolate or physically distance. Across Canada and in Kingston, many camps sprung up. A new integrated care hub was started to provide food, hygiene stations, and sleeping hubs to help people with addictions and mental health, and those who were uncomfortable or unable to access congregate settings in a shelter. Agencies provide on-site services and referrals, as needed. The City, federal funding and United Way funds were used to support this transition, and ongoing funds will be needed to support the permanent site for integrated care support. The City and partners will be conducting a review of the homelessness system and services, and the United Way and partners will be doing a similar review for youth homelessness.

### **Counselling and other services**

Agencies moved immediately to virtual services, working through the technical requirements, software that ensured privacy and safety of clients. Again, the services were in high demand. Many people who would otherwise have been able to afford counselling or had benefits, found themselves needing services and unable to pay. Covid funding helped to enable them to continue to find support.

In some cases, virtual services allowed people who might otherwise have barriers like transportation, were able to access programs. However, with domestic violence, it remains a challenge for people to access these programs in a safe way when they are unable to leave home where they are no longer safe. Numbers for counselling, including sexual assault counselling calls, went up dramatically. In Phase 3 many agencies are now offering 25% in-person counselling for those where technology, comfort levels or access was an issue. Many youth are struggling with the situation and the calls for assistance are growing.

**Next Steps:** The task force will be recruiting members to continue this work. There have been a number of individuals and groups interested in joining and/or continuing to develop and implement plans in the area.

**Social Services Recovery Taskforce  
Working Groups - Progress Summary**

**Priority: Coordination and Collaboration of Services:** Identify opportunities to collaborate in specific areas; agree how this would work; create a plan and start implementation.

<b>Food Security Sub-Group</b> -UW, City, Foodbank, Loving Spoonful, St. Vincent de Paul, Lionhearts, Food Sharing Project, KCHC (and other interested groups) to explore the idea of a Centralized Food Hub that would support all the meal and food programs and agencies in the area			
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Accomplished</b>	<b>Next Steps</b>
Centralized Food Hub with space for warehousing, refrigeration, freezing, storage, cleaning, central distribution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Research a location</li> <li>2. One-page concept summary including minimum space, specs as well as wish list</li> <li>3. Review Criteria for Grant (federal grant application opportunity for \$250K)</li> <li>4. Develop Budget</li> <li>5. Identify Partnerships</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identified 1 main location of interest – Weston’s</li> <li>• Concept created, circulated to Task Force</li> <li>• Outreach to Weston’s with invitation to submit an unsolicited proposal</li> <li>• Identified suppliers and costs for major equipment requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposals for funding</li> <li>• Project plan</li> <li>• Collaboration model</li> <li>• Identify publicly available facility(ies), specs and alternative locations</li> </ul>
<b>Building Resiliency Sub-Group</b> - build resiliency to help families and individuals thrive; building on work done to date with ACEs/ Trauma-informed care approach and community discussions already underway prior to COVID			
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Initiatives</b>	<b>Next Steps</b>
Build resiliency - at all levels (individual, family, community)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Learn from agencies already working on ACEs model</li> <li>2. Explore interest, continue to create a framework</li> <li>3. Provide trauma-informed workshops</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ACEs core group (CFKA, KCHC, KFLA Public Health) is working on developing a framework and engage the community (community tables, people with lived experience, agencies)</li> <li>• Community Drug Strategy group (facilitated by KFLA Public Health) is working on bringing trauma-informed workshops to frontline and first responders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ACEs core group – framework, action plan and next steps to be developed</li> <li>• Mapping exercise to identify community tables with interest in ACEs/Resiliency to leverage existing activities</li> <li>• Trauma informed workshops series are being planned through Community Drug Strategy</li> </ul>

<sup>I</sup> <b>Capacity Building Sub-Group</b> – helping boards and senior staff look at collaboration, shared services, other governance or operational options to ensure viability and sustainability of agencies			
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Accomplished</b>	<b>Next Steps</b>
Workshops to explore options to enhance agencies' sustainability; workshops to be held for boards and groups	ON HOLD		This will be explored again, following the sector's initial response to immediate needs

**Priority: Redesign of Services** - both virtually and in person in order to ensure everyone's safety and our impact is sustainable.

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Accomplished</b>	<b>Next Steps</b>
Tools and redesign – re-imagining service delivery (space, PPE etc.)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify space requirements</li> <li>2. Resolve Counselling Centre - Webinar – staff mental wellness</li> <li>3. Access to technology – information sharing</li> <li>4. Return to Work Guidelines and resources</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Webinar completed and posted for community use on Resolve's website, circulated to taskforce</li> <li>• Enhanced/increased rural internet hubs, sharing of information</li> <li>• B&amp;G Club return to work manual available by request – adaptable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to research, share information</li> <li>• Space requirements on hold pending more information about agency needs</li> </ul>

**Priority: Strong Marketing and Advocacy Strategy** - to promote the collective impact in the community; positioning and reminding stakeholders that agencies provide essential service to the community.

Create key messages adapted for target audiences, advocating to various ministries and funders on our local collaboration, activities and needs, enhancing internal sector communication, strengthening fundraising messages, and informing the general public so they know programs are available.

Goal	Tasks	Accomplished	Next Steps
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify target audiences and adapt messaging for each group: Ministries, levels of gov't, funders, general public</li> <li>2. Key Messages</li> <li>3. Cost Effective types and channels of communication</li> <li>4. Research – what are other jurisdictions doing? Best practices, innovation, etc.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consult with marketing agency</li> <li>2. Design/Distribute social services survey</li> <li>3. Identify/research local non-profits</li> <li>4. Identify Target Audiences</li> <li>5. Develop and test key messaging &amp; framework</li> <li>6. Develop key outcome measures</li> <li>7. Customize messages for each audience</li> <li>8. Expand messaging with graphics, videos, etc.</li> <li>9. Explore partnering with Economic Recovery Taskforce as their focus is also advocacy</li> <li>10. Implementation plan</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultant services retained (Avenue Strategy)</li> <li>• Consultation by Avenue Strategy; survey and interview responses</li> <li>• List of social services (charities &amp; non-profits) in KFL&amp;A received through 211</li> <li>• Recommendations report presented to task force: Client-centred approach with three themes: collaboration/partnerships, empathy, education/awareness</li> <li>• Phased approach to communication – internal first (non-profits), external (funders &amp; government, community)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop project plan including options for budget, implementation and coordination.</li> <li>• Committee to be recruited for accountability, consistency and leadership</li> <li>• Finalize key messages – including client-centred approach</li> <li>• Explore partnering with Economic Recovery Taskforce who are also looking at advocacy with government &amp; partners</li> <li>• Next steps to be determined based on discussion of these plans</li> </ul>

# Social Services Recovery Task Force looks beyond pandemic

Steph Crosier

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KINGSTON — As students head back to school and the economy tries to rebound, social services and charities in Kingston have started their own task force to remind residents that they, too, are essential.

“COVID-19 has stirred the whole system up and we’re all now looking at different ways of how we’re going to emerge from this stronger than ever,” Bhavana Varma, president and CEO of the United Way of Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington.

The Social Services Recovery Task Force is being led by the United Way and includes representatives from 17 of the area’s larger social service agencies and non-profits. Some of the agencies are funded by the United Way, but others are not. The agencies include the Southern Frontenac Community Services, the YMCA of Eastern Ontario, Kingston Community Health Centres, and Resolve Counselling Services.

The task force has been meeting once a month since May and has three key goals: co-ordinate and collaborate their services, redesign appropriate services for virtual use to ensure safety, and to increase their marketing and advocacy strategy. Ironically, because they’ve been so busy, they haven’t been able to share the news of the task force yet, Varma said.

“At the start of the crisis, we knew we had to respond right away, but we also needed to think about what was going to happen in the future,” Varma said. “So Mayor Bryan Paterson and I spoke, and we recognized that the role of social services were so essential at this time. It is really an essential service, what our agencies are offering.”

While speaking to the Whig-Standard about how at-risk youth in Kingston have been faring during the COVID-19 crisis, Shawn Quigley, executive director of Youth Diversion, mentioned that the task force has opened their eyes to how their traditional methods will have to change after COVID-19.

“The agencies are coming together and maximizing whatever resources that they have, especially with a lot of the funding that the Community Foundation (for Kingston and Area) had and the United Way had,” Quigley said. “Agencies are partnering together to do things that we tried very hard to do before COVID-19, but now we’re in a place where we absolutely have to do this.

“It is strengthening the fabric of the social service network in our community. We’re recognizing gaps that we didn’t even know existed as a result of COVID-19.”

Harold Parsons, executive director of the Boys and Girls Club of Kingston and Area, said that because it never seized operating, his agency has been able to take what it learned at the task force’s table and applying it immediately. In return, it has shared its continuously updating safe-operating manual.

He said it has been beneficial to interact with agencies with which the Boys and Girls Club wouldn’t normally interact because it serves different populations.

“Then I think it helps what understanding organizations’ needs are going forward,” Parsons said. “I think we always wonder what it will look like in the future and will organizations do more support together?”

In the early days of the pandemic — the panic-generated toilet paper shortage of 2020 — everyone, no matter they’re economic status, experienced food insecurity, explained Dan Irwin, executive director of Kingston’s Partners in Mission Food Bank.

“COVID-19 has helped demonstrate how food insecure much of the area is, so I felt that we should be involved in the task force so that when we talk about recovery, we talk about food security,” Irwin said.

Throughout the pandemic, the food bank has lost volunteers because many were vulnerable to contracting the virus, and its clients were lining up around the street. Irwin said the food bank’s client base also increased as parents were suddenly forced to feed their children three meals a day when they normally would have participated in school lunch and breakfast programs.

Varma said the United Way has heard these struggles from parents as well, and the task force is working on strong, long-term solutions.

“The biggest thing the task force is focusing on is food,” Varma said. “From our colleagues, right across the country we’re hearing that food has emerged as the biggest, more urgent need.

“It’s heartbreaking to think of people being hungry in a country like this. But they are and they’re just not able to make ends meet.”

She said the agencies supported by the United Way are serving 1,670 meals a day, up 400 to 500 compared to last year, and 3,300 hampers a month to families, seniors and students.

“What is important for Kingstonians to know is that there has been more collaboration between the charity sector, during this, to help each other and help solve more problems than we ever experienced,” Irwin said. “My understanding is that this isn’t something that is happening in other cities.

“I’m really proud to be a part of that.”

Varma said residents and donors need to remember that the majority of charitable organizations are essential for many people every day. While governments at every level have helped organizations with funding during the pandemic, that money will dry up and they likely won’t see the same amount for a very long time. This has led to a lot of questions and the need to develop new funding strategies.

“Long term, food delivery and even service delivery is getting more expensive,” Varma said. “How are our are we going to find stable funding? A lot of the events that agencies used to run aren’t going to happen anymore, so where do they find fundraising dollars and get stable funding at a time where agencies are scrambling just to deliver their services?”

“We always knew that there were gaps in the system, but the gaps have become canyons and people are falling through them now. So, how do we create a system where people don’t fall through if or when this happens again?”

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# Kingston GIVES

How local agencies and individuals came together  
to help when Kingston needed it most

BY HARVEY SCHACHTER

It was business as usual in January and February at Kingston's social agencies, with the focus on fundraising and trying to meet needs that never can fully be met. The coronavirus had shifted from China to Europe, but there were enough challenges here already to keep people preoccupied.

The United Way, after a record fundraising campaign last fall, was nearly ready to sign off on funding for its agencies this year when knowledge started to sink in this was not going to be a business-as-usual year. Programs wouldn't be able to operate normally in an era of social distancing, with volunteers fearful of the virus, and new needs – drastic ones – could soon emerge. The board advised CEO Bhavana Varma

that agencies be given money for the first quarter and told to spend it in the best way possible. A fundraising event for mid-March was cancelled. "I was running around trying to find wipes, and then I realized the event couldn't happen," she says.

It also became clear that the United Way had to become an even broader coalition, supporting non-member as well as member agencies in the struggle ahead. "You have to support whatever needs support in times like this," she says.

The United Way nationally started a special COVID-19 fund, which the Anna and Edward C. Churchill Foundation kicked off locally by offering to match donations up to a level of \$50,000. That fund has brought in over \$300,000, which has been supplement-

ed by \$1.18 million in federal money to the local United Way, all to be distributed to cushion the recession accompanying the coronavirus.

Others were also springing into action in mid-March, including the city administration. Social distancing and self-quarantining were difficult if not impossible in some city shelters. A new space was secured for the youth shelter on Barrie Street, with two other shelters created in the east and west ends of the city. "The city moved right away to get space," recalls Varma.

But she was beginning to realize the most critical immediate need would be food. People were losing their jobs and would require assistance. And she was not alone in this fear. Sophie Kiwala, Greg Davies and Travis

Blackmore – who all would play pivotal roles in the next two months adding to the existing food resources – were also beginning to act.

Kiwala, MPP between 2014 and 2018, heard last December that the various food programs in the city shut down for a number of days during the holidays. She contacted those groups, volunteered at Lunch by George to learn about the process, secured two locations to offer a fill-in service, galvanized a group of volunteers and provided dinners for four nights.

So when the pandemic struck, and the various food services for the homeless and others had to reconfigure – moving to takeout, losing elderly volunteers – she began to host Zoom calls, initially three a week, with what she took to calling “the vulnerable sector” of agencies and helpers. Unelected, unappointed, not heading any agency, but well known, with knowledge of government and the local scene, Kiwala was on Zoom most of the day, at the centre of a loose coalition covering issues from homelessness to food.

Problem number one was food containers, as food programs shifted to takeout. Maxine Cupido, one of Kiwala’s supporters, offered to donate them, rushing to Costco to obtain some, and Lionhearts, which supplied food to providers, handed over extras. Problem number two was, ironically, an excess of food, with restaurants shutting down and offering their supplies and with Queen’s University going from serving 23,000 lunches a day to zero. A lot of food ended up in a lot of different fridges.

The Zoom sharing calls became problem-solving summits. Kiwala singles out Shawn Seargeant, operations manager of Lionhearts, who, whenever there was a big obstacle, would volunteer to solve it – and did. “All the people on the calls are angels in our city. But some just shine,” she says.

Lionhearts began in January 2015, when Travis Blackmore and his pal Seargeant started picking up leftover food every morning from Costco at 7:30 a.m. – they had to accept everything, not be choosy – and took it to the Kingston Gospel Temple, where Blackmore’s father was pastor, before distributing what they could to local agencies with meal programs. He had grown up across the country as his father moved to



Bhavana Varma, CEO,  
United Way KFL&A

different postings – he calls himself “a pastor’s brat” – and also spent time as a drummer in Christian rock groups, touring the world, eventually settling in Kingston with his wife and three children in 2012. The impetus for Lionhearts was his belief that “there are people in our city who are poor and need a friend and something to eat.”

The program expanded beyond Costco to Findlay Foods, COBS bakery and other suppliers, siphoning \$2.3 million worth of excess food for the companies to people in need. The group opened other services, such as a live music café, and last fall experimented with a program of meals to go. As existing programs struggled, Lionhearts decided to fill the gap by serving dinners-to-go at McBurney Park, getting up and running in three days. The demand was instant and huge, with people taking buses from other parts of the city, and soon a second outlet was opened in Rideau Heights, at the Kingston Community Health Centres, and then thrice-weekly programs in Amherstview and Napanee, where the Morningstar Mission distributed it.

Will Arnaud, a chef at Bayview Farms, offered to prepare the meals and soon had a team of top chefs from other shuttered restaurants assisting, along with volunteers, including retired Brigadier-General Serge Labbé, who represented Canada at NATO and led many peacekeeping missions – serving up the finished plates. “The chefs even want to make the meal look good,” says Black-

more. “If you came, you saw someone put some love into this. It has to make you feel better.” The operation was supplying on average 700 meals a night, with people whose income had vanished joining more traditional users of such meals. The cost was considerable, about \$25,000 a week, raised through donations, with the United Way kicking in \$50,000.

Greg Davies, former chair of the division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine at Queen’s and chair of the Davies Charitable Foundation, was also concerned about the many people in Kingston who had lost their income with the lockdown. The foundation was completing a \$100,000 grant competition, but he decided to pull back, offer the two winners their \$50,000 each next year and instead devote this year’s money to the immediate emergency. He called other local philanthropists and in 48 hours accumulated \$500,000. He was determined to get it into the hands of recipients fast, suspicious that government would not be able to react in time. Loblaws agreed to honour gift cards at No Frills, charging only 90 cents for each dollar spent, thus adding an extra \$50,000 to the Kingston’s Friends Feeding Friends coffers. Money was flowing in just 11 days, with the Partners in Mission Foodbank co-ordinating with local employers to get it into the hands of their employees who had lost their jobs.

“So many people run a fine line financial-



Lionhearts volunteers handing out meals and a drink at the Kingston Community Health Centres.

ly, and if they miss a paycheque they are in trouble. Here everyone was missing a paycheque at the same time,” says food bank executive director Dan Irwin. His own regular hampers program saw a jump in demand initially but then subsided to normal levels, although new customers are up 16.7 per cent over last year. The St. Vincent de Paul Society of Kingston closed its meal program – which serves about 20,000 people annually in a crowded space – and offered bagged lunches, with demand increased by about 20 per cent.

While that food scramble was on, the Kingston Youth Shelter was shifting from its long-time Brock Street home, where the youngsters were crammed into small rooms with bunk beds, into larger premises on Union Street found by the City, a space formerly used for addictions and mental health services. The United Way supplied a moving van for the fridge and stove; new beds and mattresses; professional cleaning and disinfecting three times a week; art supplies, puzzles and reading materials; and money for groceries, takeout and even chocolate milk as a treat. Denise Lamb, manager of youth services for the shelter, recalls Varma calling and asking: “What else do the kids need?” At that

point, the youngsters were in 14-day isolation, some facing remote learning for school, so the answer was computer tablets, which the agency supplied. “We otherwise would have shut down, and where would the kids have gone?” asks Lamb.

In the past the youngsters would leave the shelter in the morning. Now they couldn’t, so some chose to be on the streets. They joined with others in the homeless community who didn’t like the rules at shelters, including restrictions on using drugs. Encampments sprouted up and then coalesced in Belle Park. Meredith MacKenzie, a physician at the Street Health Centre, says those gathered at Belle Park felt they had more autonomy and could look after each other better at that spot. “They are dealing with psychological factors – irritability, unpredictability. In such case people use substances to handle it,” she notes. Varma says, “A shelter is not a place for someone with crystal meth behaviours. How can we find a space for them? We need a new facility.”

Emotional issues don’t just affect people on the street, of course. Resolve Counselling Services started getting calls immediately from people feeling anxious or depressed. Some were losing their businesses. Families were in distress. “We were really busy –

hopping busy,” recalls Kim Irvine-Albano, director of clinical programming. And it continued: in May, initial contacts with clients were up 35 per cent over April, whereas normally a 30-per-cent decline occurs that month.

At the Sexual Assault Centre Kingston, volume on the crisis lines swelled by 25 per cent, and the time of calls increased from 20 to 25 minutes on average. On March 23, the agency was swamped, with volunteers handling calls for 12 hours – a worst-case scenario for the agency but, in a way, executive director Brea Hutchinson notes, a good thing, since it meant people were reaching out for support.

Counselling across the city moved to remote technology, something the centre was prepared for, having received a federal grant last year to look at best practices in that realm. Initially, many clients at various agencies passed on remote counselling, figuring they would wait out the storm, but in time most signed on. Some preferred it, particularly those who had to travel a longer distance for appointments.

But at Resolve group sessions had to be cancelled, a big loss. And calls were no longer as private. “A significant number of survivors live with their perpetrators. The pandemic made it hard to escape,” notes Hutchinson. Lisa Fox, women’s community counsellor with Interval House, says perpetrators with a narcissistic personality isolate their target, to control them; the pandemic played into their hands: “I have done this work for 19 years. I suspect it will get worse. Someone in an abuse situation feels anything but stable and secure. Now we’re in a world that is anything but stable and secure, and that will combine.”

Irvine-Albano singles out youth as also hard hit in the early days of the pandemic, since many find well-being by hanging out with their friends. Schools were shut down, jobs non-existent and they were spending more time than they preferred with their parents, if not forced back into living with them. Wendy Vuyk, director of community health at the Kingston Community Health Centres, says the Pathways to Education program has helped to reduce the dropout rate from 52 per cent of students in the Inner Harbour and Rideau Heights area to 20

per cent. But she expects slippage now, due to remote learning and the other pressures of the pandemic.

While agencies coped with the immediate brunt of the pandemic and will continue to provide support, a hidden side of the emergency is that most conventional fundraising stopped, and it's uncertain when the events that are a staple for such support can resume. The Community Foundation for Kingston and Area, which received \$413,720 from the federal government for distribution locally, surveyed 75 agencies and found the pandemic created a two-fold challenge—loss of revenue or donations, at the same time as demand for services increased. Normally the money raised this year would be directed to next year's operations, so that's when the vacuum may be felt.

Varma says there have always been gaps in Kingston social services, but, under the pandemic, those gaps turned into crevices, and then canyons opened up. She's a planner, and her immediate instinct is to develop strategic ways to improve things, but the uncertainty is too great for that, and the immediate focus has had to be on getting money to people in distress. The youth shelter's Lamb says, "This was a dance that none of us have danced before," and, in that sense, the adaptability of the community and its agencies was encouraging. The community foundation found that, as of April 30, only 16 per cent of agencies in its sample had shut down completely until reopening was feasible, while most of the others were continuing to deliver some, or all, services in a different way, given physical distancing requirements.

Kiwala, who is very worried about food security in the future, says Kingston can be proud of its pandemic response: "We have been agile; we have been nimble. We have collaborated, breaking down silos." That fits with the prescription in a recent study by academics from Stanford University that found communities that are the most cohesive and co-operative recover the quickest from disasters. And it will continue, with Varma heading a new social recovery team with an action-oriented mindset—but also an awareness austerity may be down the road. 🍷

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